

TAKE A BOW

Kyudo or Zen archery is a lesson in control over one's body, mind and demeanour

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Standing well over two metres, the yumi is the world's largest bow. Traditionally made of laminating bamboo, wood and leather, the asymmetrical Japanese longbow is a marvel of engineering. It is said samurais who wielded it could accurately shoot an arrow to hit the eyes of their enemies with explosive power and accuracy. But in the context of Zen, the longbow has evolved into an instrument of spiritual discipline to train one's body and mind.

Also known as Zen archery, kyudo (The Way of the Bow) is practised in the city by Prem Yogi, a Swiss Oshoite in his 60s, who's been learning and teaching kyudo for decades. "I am pursuing the art for various reasons. One of them is to stay fit mentally and physically," said the kyudo instructor. As lithe as the yumi he handles with studied ease, Prem Yogi, a 5th dan in the martial art highlighted the benefits of practising kyudo.

BOW AND THE BODY

Like any other sport, practising kyudo subjects the body into a regimen that aids overall health and fitness. While using the yumi, the archer is required to maintain a certain posture that works everything from the legs to the back and the arms to the neck and shoulders. This means the practice effectively utilises several main muscle groups in the body. These include the triceps, located at the back of the upper arm, the deltoid muscles in the shoulders and the latissimus dorsi in the lower back. According to the archer, the very act of preparing to shoot using a yumi requires

tremendous use of the upper body muscles. These movements are classified as hassetsu or the time spent in stringing the bow with an arrow. During this time, it's important for archers to move their upper body in alignment to the position of their feet. Then archers have to draw their bows and hold the shooting position — this action of drawing the bow with the back straight is when the deltoid muscles in the shoulders and the latissimus dorsi in the lower back are impacted.

"I don't suffer from backache as my back muscles get an effective workout practising kyudo," smiled Prem Yogi. The results are even more evident in the case of his 84-year-old kyudo partner, Bodhihanna, who can use the powerful yumi with consummate ease. For an octogenarian, the German is remarkably nimble, hitting the bull's-eye from a distance of 30 feet!

MIND THE TARGET

Apart from giving the muscles a workout, Kyudo also helps discipline the mind. Aiming for and hitting the target comes with hours of training the mind to stay still and focussed — a habit that this sport sharpens above everything else. Soft-spoken and gracious, Prem Yogi exemplifies the spirit of kyudo. But developing such a calm and focused personality requires work. Kyudo practitioners can be easily distracted by their environment as they depend solely on their senses. To overcome this, they strive to cultivate what is called fudoshin, which translates to having an unwavering state of mind. This state of equanimity is achieved through rigorous training and repeatedly practising kyudo techniques. To attain the state of fudoshin, which is akin to being peaceful yet in a state of determination,

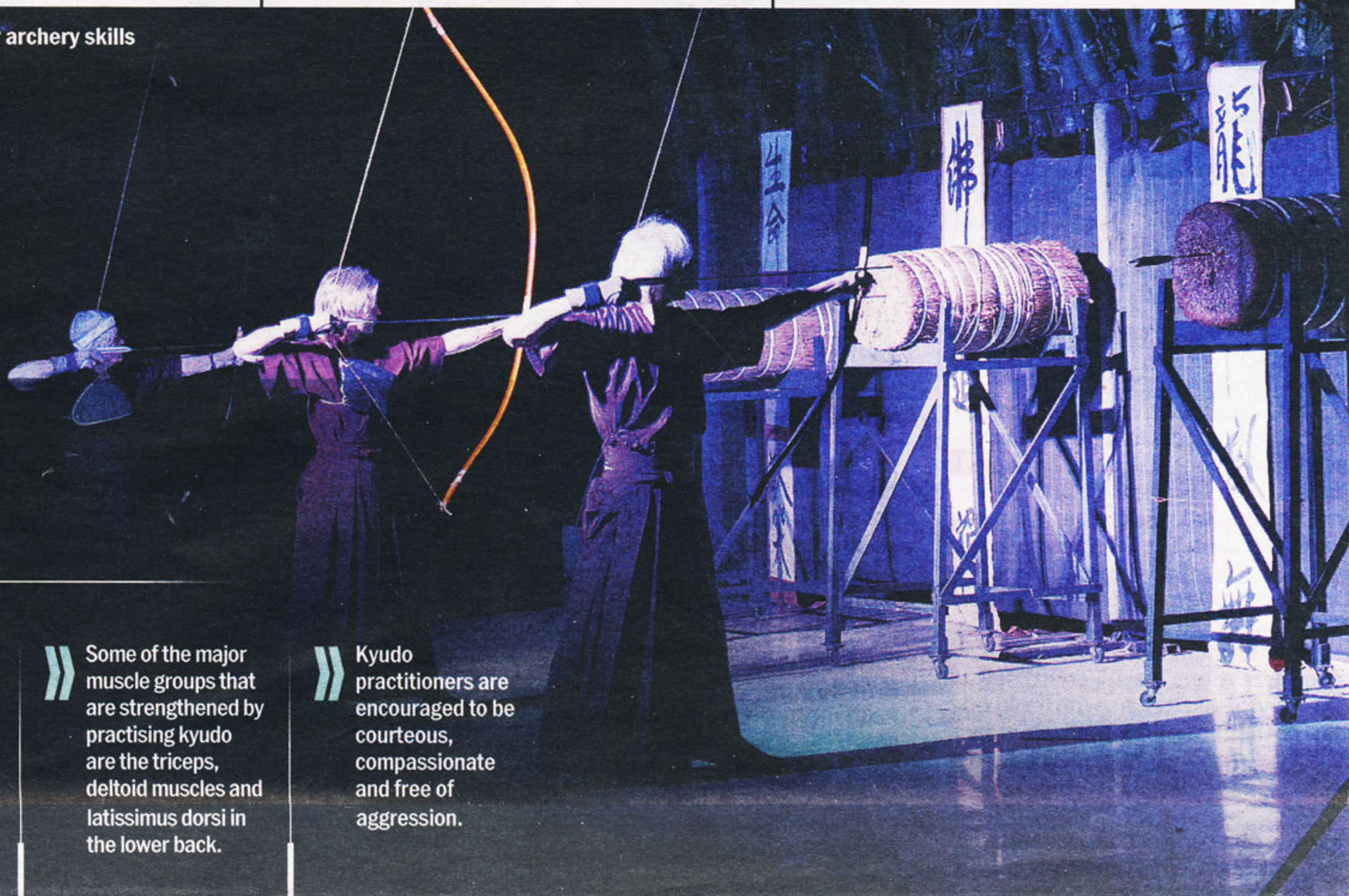
the archers stand tall and breathe deeply. They are also taught to remain relaxed yet full of energy and intent. The archers also adopt a nonchalant facial expression giving the impression that nothing can perturb them.

RESTRAINT AND RESPECT

While it strengthens the body and mind, the art also teaches students invaluable life lessons. For instance, one of the first lessons you learn is not to be too preoccupied with hitting the target because you might lose your calm. In a kyudo ceremony, there is no rush. The movement of the archer is relaxed and serene. Prem Yogi, Bodhihanna and another archer demonstrated this as they walked in unison at the Osho Meditation Resort and stood in line before stringing their longbows with arrows. The first to shoot, Bodhihanna gently handled her yumi and shot an arrow at the target. The two archers behind her followed suit and released their arrows in a relaxed manner. "The idea behind the kyudo ceremony is to show utmost respect towards other archers," explained Bodhihanna.

Another lesson that it Kyudo can teach is the importance of being respectful and polite. According to Prem Yogi, good manners is absolutely crucial if a kyudo practitioner wishes to advance in the art. "Participating in a kyudo examination under the supervision of Japanese masters is quite an experience. They hate it when students fake a bow that's not genuine or acts polite with the aim of earning brownie points. They are experts at reading body language and any inconsistency of character is not tolerated. So, to advance in kyudo, you have to train yourself to become a better human being first," signed off the archer.

The Zen archers hone their archery skills at Osho Meditation Resort



Kyudo basics

» The martial art is an offshoot of kyujutsu (art of archery). But with the influence of Zen Buddhism, it developed into a spiritual practice.

» Some of the major muscle groups that are strengthened by practising kyudo are the triceps, deltoid muscles and latissimus dorsi in the lower back.

» Kyudo practitioners are encouraged to be courteous, compassionate and free of aggression.